

UEDA Shizuteru 上田閑照, *Nishida Kitarō: Ningen no shōgai to iu koto* 西田幾多郎—人間の生涯ということ [Nishida Kitarō: On what we call a life]. Dōjidai Library 243. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995. 253 pp. ¥1,000 paper. ISBN 4-00-260243-5.

———, *Keiken to jikaku: Nishida Tetsugaku no “basho” o motomete* 経験と自覚—西田哲学の「場所」を求めて [Experience and self-awareness: In pursuit of the “place” of Nishida’s philosophy]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1994. 247 pp. ¥2,800 cloth, ISBN 4-00-000629-0.

UEDA SHIZUTERU HAS devoted his years after retiring from teaching at Kyoto University some eight years ago to making the thought of Nishida better known in Japan, editing material from Nishida’s *Zenshū* for reissue, writing commentaries, and publishing his own interpretations of Nishida’s key ideas.

These efforts, as overdue as they are in Japan, are also welcomed by the philosophical community outside of Japan, even though the barrier of the language locks the majority of readers out. Interest in the West in the thought of Nishida and disciples (fanned in part by translations of Nishida, Tanabe, Takeuchi, and Nishitani that have appeared over the past fifteen years) has led many a young scholar and graduate student to probe deeper into the state of philosophy in Japan today, and in some cases to undertake the training to read the texts in the original—only to discover that the influence of Nishida’s ideas on the contemporary intellectual scene in Japan is considered minimal, if not outright passé. Persisting in their conviction of the value of these thinkers for world philosophy and refusing to be swayed by their neglect at home, these scholars have in fact played an important role in raising consciousness of Nishida’s thought within Japan during the past decade. Admittedly, not all of the rediscovery has met the expectations of serious students of philosophy, and some of it has hung on the coattails of the naivest of *nihonjinron*. All of this makes the kind of serious, textually

informed work that Ueda is doing essential if Nishida's thought is to ride out a passing fad and take its rightful place in world philosophy.

Among scholars of Japan's intellectual history outside of Japan, Ueda is commonly viewed as the last of the Kyoto-school philosophers; with his retirement an era has ended. Although Ueda himself never met Nishida face-to-face, and generally avoids the term "Kyoto school," his acceptance of the responsibility of raising the level of critical awareness of Nishida's philosophy in Japan is a fitting curtain call—and a necessary one. Ueda's commitment is widely known in the West. Even where the texts of his work are not accessible in foreign languages, he has given courage to young scholars wondering whether Nishida's thought had faded into oblivion under the shadow of Nishitani and Tanabe, whose translations have attracted most attention in the West and outsold translations of Nishida's work by a wide margin. Ueda's participation in international conferences of religious philosophy inside and outside of Japan has given his efforts further visibility and challenged the long-standing assumption of listlessness among Nishida's disciples for their teacher's thought.

Compared with the secondary material on Nishida published in the generation after his death, Ueda's work is less addicted to paraphrase and simple exposition. While it may not be as rigorously outlined or referenced as that work, it is more mature and philosophically critical in its own right. If Ueda never compromises his basic belief in the genius of Nishida, neither does he hesitate to speak with the authority of one who has, in Nishida's phrase, caught the *kotsu* 骨 and can speak about it from the inside.

His latest two books, here under review, are a contribution in that same direction. For Ueda, (and here the influence of Nishitani cannot be discounted), the religious element in Nishida's philosophy is not a mere dimension to a many-sided system, as one topic among others, but as a leitmotif that affects the whole from beginning to end. Far from being restricted to passages where conventionally religious vocabulary is used or historical figures of religion appear, Nishida's central vocabulary is understood by Ueda as one with the soul of the religious quest. Ueda's catch of the philosophical position of Nishida and its relation to the religious quest come together in the explicit aim he sets himself in *Nishida Kitarō: On what we call a life*.

The need for a serious intellectual biography of Nishida is long overdue, and arguably Ueda would be the right one to answer that need. Instead, he adopts a position regarding the life of Nishida that gives him access to the information while absolving himself of the critical demands of the biographer. The ideal, as he sets it out in his opening chapter, is to use the facts of Nishida's life as clues to clarify the question "What is it to live a life?" In particular, he sees a life as a braid of three elements. First, there is the individual life, with the story of a particular personality, interpersonal relations, feelings and ideas, successes and failures. Second is the story of the times in which that life was lived, both in the sense of the proximate history (近代) and in the sense of second wider historical horizon of the age (巨代). Finally there are the "circumstances" (境涯) of a higher rhythm that transcends both the for-

mer meanings of “a life” and inspires the deepest reaches of “character” (風格) in the individual personality. Taken together and set in the context of Nishida’s own life, these elements hold out the promise of helping us to understand what it means to live.

The terms he uses to describe his approach are novel (at least to me), and one is given to understand that he has stumbled on something dependent on traditional Japanese ideas. In fact, the terms are far from esoteric and the approach is readily understandable, given the breadth of genres that biography has developed over the past millennium and more. Indeed it is the very familiarity of the approach that heightens the expectation of the reader. Although the overarching question of life takes a backseat until the conclusion, Ueda’s concern with Nishida’s “character” does run like a red thread through the whole. He goes to great lengths to let Nishida have his own say about his own life and times he lived in, and the secondary sources drawn on are sparse, but this is of a piece with Ueda’s guiding assumption that Nishida the man and his ideas are of sufficient stature to warrant using them as a lodestone for the great philosophical question of life.

After tracing Nishida’s career in four chapters from his youth to his career at Kyoto University, Ueda takes up the problem of Nishida’s thought in relation to Japan’s military escapades in Asia. Ueda’s reading of Nishida’s *The Problem of Japanese Culture* (1938) is far more lenient towards its author than most contemporary historians in Japan and the West have been. Still, after having discussed these questions at some length with Ueda and others during an international conference devoted to the topic,<sup>1</sup> I am personally convinced that he is right in absolving Nishida of the charge of supporting the military imperialists. What I cannot accept is Ueda’s refusal to admit any trace of latent totalitarian and nationalist elements in Nishida’s thought, and to allow this refusal to color his view of the events of the war so differently from the way self-critical historians have done. This is a long debate, and one on which our horns will probably stay locked for some time to come.

Related to Ueda’s presentation of Nishida’s wartime thinking is perhaps my most serious disappointment with the book. In promising to present a picture of the “age” as part of the story of Nishida’s life, only the vaguest references to criticism of his ideas, or indifference to them, by competent contemporaries and successors is made. Only a few lines are devoted to Tanabe’s critique, and nothing at all is said of informed critics of Nishida’s view of the emperor or of the new world order. To this extent Nishida’s life is torn away from its living context and set in a kind of hagiographical hothouse with Ueda posting himself to guard the door. Scholars of Japan’s intellectual history inside of Japan and out are not unaware of the critical literature, and one would have thought it time for the inheritors of the Kyoto School legacy to come clean. Not to do so is to erect a great wall at the very point where Ueda wants to open a door: mainly from Nishida’s life work to the contemporary world.

I learned a great deal from this book, and the margins of my book are full

<sup>1</sup> The record of this conference was published as HEISIG & MARALDO 1995.

of questions and comments it elicited. It makes me only the more anxious for a full-length intellectual biography, though I now recognize that this is not the book that Ueda will write.

In an afterword Ueda recommends two of his other books to fill in the details of Nishida's philosophy, by and large passed over in the present volume: *Reading Nishida Kitarō* (UEDA 1991) and *Experience and Self-Awareness*. The former, a record of a series of seminars that Ueda conducted spanning the period immediately prior to and after his retirement, is well-structured and accessible to a wide audience of readers interested in knowing Nishida's ideas. The latter takes up four separate themes in chapters of varying length and readability. In contrast with the opening and concluding pieces, "The Thinking of Nishida Kitarō" and "The Difficulty of Reading Nishida," the bulk of the book that falls between is hard-going for readers not already familiar with Nishida's writings. The problems of pure experience and the relationship between Zen and philosophy overlap somewhat with their treatment in the earlier book (where they also appear as chapters 2 and 3), but go beyond an explanation of Nishida to a direct wrestling with the questions themselves, giving Ueda ample room to develop his own thinking.

In referring to the encounter of East and West in Nishida's thought, Ueda notes in passing that the world situation has changed dramatically since the time of Nishida's death to include the reality of North and South as well (19). But when he return to the question later, he seems to have his hands too full with resolving the East-West question to consider what it might mean to broaden the horizon of Japanese philosophy to include the intellectual heritage outside of Europe and the United States (232-33). Having raised the question, one assumes that Ueda will come back to it as part of his effort at "opening" Nishida's philosophy to the world.

The title essay of the book, "Experience and Self-Awareness" (originally serialized in the pages of the journal *Shisō* 思想), is the longest, comprising well over half of the book. Beginning from Nishida's own assessment that "The direction of my thought was already settled in *The Idea of the Good*," Ueda takes up the dominant idea of that work, "pure experience," focusing in particular on the meaning of subjectivity in the context where the subject-object dichotomy is overcome. His preferred style of argument here—as in so many of his other writings of a directly philosophical nature—is to concentrate on selected short passages and work a word-by-word exegesis on them, drawing attention to the way each piece weaves into the broader fabric of Nishida's thought and freeing his own imagination to wrench as much suggestiveness as he can from easily overlooked nuances of style and vocabulary. Particularly interesting here is his handling of short passages from Descartes, the perfect counterfoil to Nishida's idea of the experiencing subject.

In "Zen and Philosophy" Ueda approaches the question of the role of Zen on Nishida's thinking from a different angle than he had taken in *Reading Nishida*. The decisive influence of Zen, he argues, can be located at three points in *The Idea of the Good*: concrete experience, metaphysical realities, and the True Self. The first point is one Ueda has devoted considerable attention to over the years. The last was Nishitani's favored point of contact between

Zen and Nishida. Here the attention falls on the role of metaphysics. He alludes to Karl Jaspers' idea of "ciphers" from the third volume of his *Philosophy* to draw a parallel to Nishida's use of metaphysics as enlightening the relationship between experience and language (198–200). I am not persuaded. Nishida's view of symbol and myth has always seemed to me simplistic in comparison with what we find in Jaspers. In a much later book, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, Jaspers develops the idea of ciphers beyond his earlier intimations, making it clear that "myth" is not a mere naïveté falling in the cracks between the language of the transcendent (in immediate experience) and the language of reason (reflection), as Nishida took it to be. Myth is rather a critical posture towards both the language of experience and the language of reflection, a "spiritual reality" in its own right, essential to the preservation of both those function of language. Moreover, for Jaspers the overcoming of the dualism between subject and object (which he takes every bit as seriously as Nishida did) is not only achieved in mystical experience but also in realization of what he calls "encompassing," and it is precisely the world of myth and ciphers latent in rationalized doctrine that stimulate that realization (JASPERS 1967, p. 79). It is not so much that Jaspers position contradicts that of Nishida, but that it suggests another point at which the latter needs be "opened" up.

When Ueda comes to talk of Nishida's style of writing and method of expression, he never fails to point to the layers of meaning covered over by the technicalities of the surface language and floating in the mists between the lines of his prose—much of which defies translation into any language other than the one Nishida himself used. In conceding the point, I have always felt a question gnawing at the back of my mind, which I take this occasion to frame in print. By the same token and for the same reasons, how much did Nishida really understand when he had to wrestle with the enchanting turns of phrase and ciceronean periods of William James or when he poured over the subtle suggestiveness of Henri Bergson's choice of words, both thinkers who were formative in his own thinking? Though it falls too far afield of a short review to spell out the details, the idea of "pure experience" as we find it in James' essay on "The Stream of Consciousness," when compared with Nishida's treatment of it in *A Study of the Good*, seems to oblige the conclusion that either Nishida never finished reading James or that he did not really get what James was saying. Ueda's unparalleled grasp of Nishida's philosophy could go a long way to securing it a greater hearing in the forum of world philosophy by opening it up to this sort of critical questions—emulating Nishida's courage by taking care not to emulate his answers.

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